

American Parishes in the Twenty-First Century

Mary L. Gautier*

It is exciting to be witness to the twenty-first century in American Catholicism. Much has changed over the course of the twentieth century and I will discuss some key trends in American Catholicism that likely will be shaping American parishes in the twenty-first. In particular, changes in Catholic population during the twentieth century have influenced the number of American parishes, their location, and their size, as well as the composition of parishioners and of the leaders who staff those parishes. Other changes in American Catholic attitudes and behaviours have influenced parish life in the twenty-first century, affecting parish participation, sacramental practice, and attachment to the faith. At the same time, the aspects of the faith that people find attractive and the markers that people say are essential to their Catholic identity remain virtually unchanged as we head into the twenty-first century. How do we keep Catholic identity strong, engage new generations in parish life, and grow vital parishes in the twenty-first century? Those are the challenges we will explore. In this article, I will discuss three of the primary challenges to parish life that we hear about on

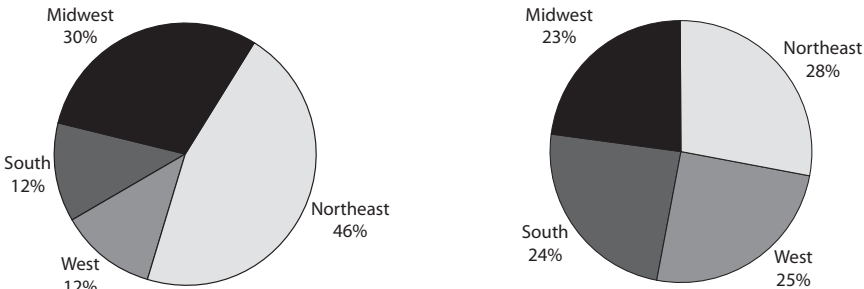
* Mary Gautier is a senior research associate at CARA (Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate) in Washington, DC. She has a PhD in sociology from Louisiana State University. Before coming to CARA in 1998, Mary taught sociology at Louisiana State University and at Texas Christian University, and served as a lay pastoral associate at St George Parish in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for six years. At CARA, Mary specialises in Catholic demographic trends in the United States. She also edits *The CARA Report*, a quarterly research publication, and other CARA publications. She is co-author of *Catholicism USA* (2000), *Global Catholicism* (2003), *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (2007), *Best Practices of Catholic Pastoral and Finance Councils* (2010), *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood Since Vatican II* (2012), *American Catholics in Transition* (2013), *New Generations of Catholic Sisters* (2014), and *Bridging the Gap: The Opportunities and Challenges of International Priests Ministering in the United States* (2014). This article was a keynote presentation at the Pastoral Research Conference, 'Beliefs and Practices of Australian Catholics: What We Know and Why it Matters', in Melbourne on 19 February 2014.

a near daily basis from media calls: Why are parishes closing? Why are there so many former Catholics? Will Millennial Catholics keep the faith?

Parish Closings

Let's begin with the headlines. What does the American media have to say about Catholics in the United States? One attention grabber is the fact that parishes are closing in the United States: one hundred parishes have closed in Buffalo, fifty in Cleveland; and reorganisation has occurred in New York, Boston, Philadelphia—all the traditional bastions of Catholic population and Catholic culture. In particular, parishes are closing in the upper Midwest and in the Northeast. However, in other parts of the country the number of parishes is staying stable and even increasing. So what is going on? Is the Catholic Church in decline or is it growing?

Actually, both ... The following pair of charts reflects the patterns of growth in Catholic population by US census region over the past sixty years. In the chart on the left, you can see that Catholics were still concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest in 1950, just beginning to grow out of the traditional immigrant population settlement patterns that had so marked the Catholic experience in the United States in the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. The chart on the right shows the distribution of Catholics across those same four regions in 2010.

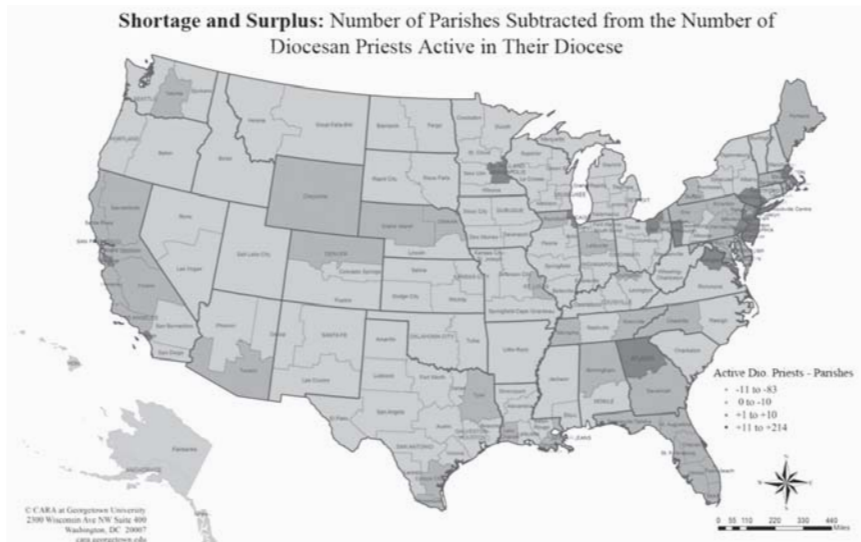


Clearly, the greatest growth in Catholic population since 1950 has been in the West and the South. Some of this growth is due to immigration—there are still significant numbers emigrating to the United States from various Catholic population centres around the world. Some of this growth is due to natural increase—although family size among Catholics nationally is now identical with that of others in the rest of the country. Much of the growth is due to internal migration—as the urban areas in the Northeast and rural areas of the Midwest lose young population to jobs in the South and West, and to the suburbs around major metropolitan areas. Some of the additional growth, particularly in the South and the West, is due to migration into the United States of Hispanic Catholics originally from Latin America.

So, what happens when the population moves? Well, they don't take their parishes with them, so there is a mismatch between the location of the parishes and the location of the people. For example, Allegheny county (home to Pittsburgh)—ranks number three among counties in terms of the number of Catholic parishes it contains, but number fifteen in terms of its Catholic population. Wayne county, Michigan (home of Detroit, the centre of American auto manufacture in the twentieth century), and Worcester, Massachusetts (a major manufacturing centre until the last century), are even starker, ranking numbers four and five, respectively, in terms of the number of parishes in each county, but thirty-eighth and thirty-fifth in terms of their Catholic population.

American parishes are also aging—there was a building 'boom' around the turn of the twentieth century (with a large influx of Catholic immigrants) and again between 1951 and 1975 (post-World War II and the Baby Boom). The parishes that are closing tend to be smaller, on average, and located mostly in the Northeast and upper Midwest. The newer parish churches that are being built tend to be much larger (often seating 1200 people or more) and are primarily in the South and West—also home to the 'newest' populations of Catholics. Nationally, we now have more than 3500 Catholics per parish, on average, and an average of 1200 registered households.

Another reason for parish closings has to do with the number of priests available to shepherd such parishes. The total number of priests in the United States reached its peak in the early 1970s. Since that time, the net number of priests available for ministry has been below replacement level, due to too few ordinations to compensate for the numbers retiring, dying, and leaving. Today, the number of active diocesan priests is nearly equal to the total number of parishes.



So, we have a second mismatch—between the number of parishes in a diocese and the number of priests available to staff them. Dioceses in light grey in the accompanying map have fewer active diocesan priests than parishes, while dioceses in darker and darkest grey have more active priests than parishes, in some cases because they have already undergone substantial reorganisation.

Many bishops in the United States today are exploring several alternative models of parish leadership. Three of the most common are these:

- multi-parish ministry (more than a quarter of parishes), which involves clustered, linked, yoked, twinned, or paired parishes, or parishes that are sister parishes to at least one other parish
- consolidated leadership (almost one in ten parishes)—also known as merged parishes, in which two or more contiguous parishes are closed (suppressed) and a new parish is created (erected) out of the territory of the suppressed parishes. Bishops tend to be reluctant to choose this model because closing a parish is always traumatic for its parishioners.
- PLC (Parish Life Coordinator¹) parishes (fewer than 500 in all), as provided for by canon 517 §2; such parishes are entrusted to a deacon or a lay person.

In addition to these models of parish leadership, many bishops are also engaging priests from outside the United States to serve in parishes. Today, the number of international priests serving in the United States is approximately one quarter the size of the entire diocesan presbyterate. More than 6500 priests, from countries as varied as India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Mexico, Poland, and Vietnam, serve parishes in the United States.

Disaffiliation

Here's another set of headlines that have been getting a lot of media attention in America: one in five Americans is a 'None', a person who claims no religious faith; one in ten Americans is a former Catholic. What is really going on?

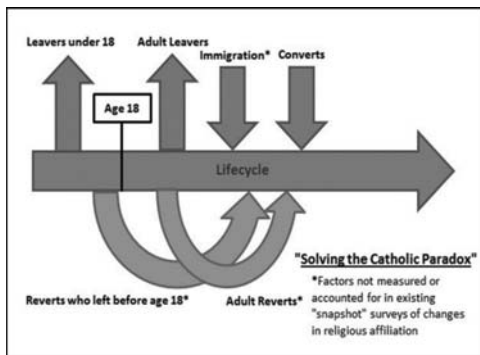
Actually, there is relative stability across generations and over time in Catholic affiliation. Millennials (people born in 1982 or later) are just as likely to be Catholic as previous generations. While it is true that the number of former Catholics is large (some estimates approach 20 million) this is largely a function of the absolute size of the Catholic population in the United States (nearly 80 million self-identified Catholics). Catholics retain more members than any single Protestant denomination.

And many of those who leave the Catholic Church come back—we call them 'Reverts' (about one in five of all self-identified Catholic adults—see the curved arrows in the flow chart below). When and why do Catholics leave the faith?

1. 'Parish Life Coordinator' is one of the many names for this position.

- A majority *leave before age twenty-one*. Many had not been not raised in practicing households. These leavers are predominantly male. Their number one reason for leaving is: 'I just gradually drifted away from religion'.
- About half *become unaffiliated 'Nones'* and the other half begin to *identify with a Protestant denomination*.
- *Of those who become 'Nones'*, more than half (56 per cent) are unhappy with Catholic Church teachings on homosexuality and abortion, about half (48 per cent) are unhappy with Catholic Church teachings on birth control.
- *Of those who become Protestants*, 70 per cent find a religion they like more, 43 per cent say they are unhappy with Catholic teachings regarding the Bible.
- Note that one in five former Catholics are immigrants. These are people who were baptised and perhaps raised Catholic elsewhere but no longer identify as Catholic in the United States. Immigration contributes to the 'former Catholic' phenomenon just as it contributes to Catholic population growth. About two in three Hispanics in the United States self-identify as Catholic.

The flow chart displays movement into and out of the Catholic faith over the course of a lifetime. Let's break it down:

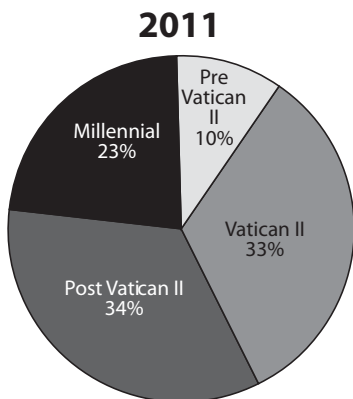


- 58 per cent of 'new' US Catholics in a given year come through infant baptism or the RCIA.
- 24 per cent come to the United States after being baptised in another country (i.e., immigration).
- 18 per cent are 'Reverts', people who had left and have come back.

Missing Millennials

A third major headline in the US popular press states that young people today are rejecting the faith of their parents, claiming to be 'spiritual but not religious'. What does that mean, in terms of practice and belief? First of all, who are Millennial Catholics? What is really going on here?

Millennial Catholics (you call them 'Generation Y' in Australia) are young adults, in their twenties and early thirties. They, along with Post-Vatican II Catholics (you call them 'Generation X'), who are in their mid-thirties and forties, now make up more than half of all adult, self-identified Catholics. (See the left



half of the 2011 pie chart, which shows the composition of the US Catholic Church according to generation in 2011.)

Although the media reports proclaim a dramatic drop-off in Mass attendance among this youngest generation, the data actually suggest that this is not something new at all, but rather a generational change that has occurred with the Vatican II Generation (Baby Boomers), who are now in their mid-fifties to early seventies. Only those who came of age prior to Vatican II still have a majority that attends Mass on a weekly basis—for the other generations of

Catholics, fewer than half of any generation attend on a weekly basis.

Nevertheless, when we study parishioners at worship, the median age of US Catholics sitting in the pew is fifty-two. This means that on any given Sunday half of those sitting in the pews are younger than age fifty-two! About forty per cent are of the Post-Vatican II Generation (mid-thirties and forties) and the other ten per cent are Millennials.

When we look at these Mass attenders by race and ethnicity, we see that minority respondents are, on average, younger, and that non-Hispanic white parishioners are a little older than the average. This fact has a big impact on parish life, as well, because younger Catholics are more culturally diverse than the older generations.

When we ask them why they attend Mass, these younger Catholics are just as likely as the generations before them to say that they enjoy experiencing the liturgy, they feel a need to receive the Eucharist, and they enjoy being with others at Mass. They are no more likely than other generations to say they attend Mass because the church requires it, out of habit, or to please someone else. And when asked for the reasons they don't attend Mass more often, younger Catholics are *more likely* than older Catholics to cite family responsibilities and *no more likely* than older generations to say that they are 'just not a religious person', 'it's boring', or 'it's not a mortal sin to miss Mass'.

On the whole, parishioners are satisfied with parish life in the United States. They think that, on the whole, parish priests do a good job and they do not think that parishes are too big and impersonal. This is despite the fact that the average parish size has increased from just under 900 households in 2000 to about 1200 households in 2010, as smaller parishes are consolidated and newer, larger churches are built.

At the same time, American parishioners appear to be somewhat reluctant to take on leadership roles in the parish: two in three agree that most Catholics don't want to take on leadership roles in their parish. Six in ten agree that priests are not looking for leadership from them.

So, does any of this sound familiar?

In conclusion, American parishes in the twenty-first century, much like contemporary Australian parishes, are facing many challenges, just as they always have. Current challenges in the American context include:

- an aging infrastructure of parishes, which are sometimes not located where needed—which, in turn, results in the necessity for parish closures and mergers, parish clusters, and other models of restructuring
- rapid growth of Catholic population in some areas, which results in additional building costs and perhaps Catholic ‘megaparishes’
- too few priests to meet pastoral needs, which results in parish clusters, ‘priestless’ parishes, and the necessity to employ international priests
- generational changes in the attitudes and behaviours of Catholics, which results in the challenge of how to communicate the eternal message of salvation in a way that is culturally relevant to new generations of Catholics.

Are we up for the challenge?
